GEORGE WHITEFIELD – Lessons for Today (Part 3) – WHITEFIELD AND THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND
By David Meager

> *'He preached nothing but the basic doctrines of the Church of England; in glowing contrast to the majority of the clergy.'* Arnold Dallimore, Vol 1 p116

> *'Church or no Church, the people must be saved.'* John Wesley

The previous two Cross†Way articles on George Whitefield examined the message and the impact of his preaching. We saw that he preached the doctrines of grace, which emphasised God's holiness, man's sinfulness, the necessity of the new birth, and heaven and hell. We also saw that God blessed this message as many were convicted of their sin and experienced joy in salvation.

This article will attempt to examine Whitefield's opinion of the formularies of the Church of England, his position within it and his strategy for preaching the gospel.

Whitefield's opinion of the Church of England formularies
Dallimore's biography[1] reveals clearly that Whitefield believed that the Church of England's formularies (39 Articles, Prayer Book and Ordinal) were Scriptural, Reformed and evangelical formularies, which he was prepared to use and defend.

The following two quotes reveal how he justified himself to those clergy who accused him of teaching doctrine contrary to the Church of England's formularies:

> *'He had constantly affirmed that only an evangelical theology was in keeping with the doctrinal Articles of the Church. "I stay close to her Articles and Homilies" he declared and to a correspondent who suggested that his preaching of the necessity of "the new birth" was an innovation, he replied: "The principles which I maintain are purely Scriptural, and every way agreeable to the Church of England articles."'*

> *'Likewise, after setting forth the doctrine of 'justification by faith' to a clergyman who denied it, he added, "This is the doctrine of the Church of England. Unless you hold this and other evangelical principles, how, dear Sir, is it consistent with sincerity to eat her bread?"'* Vol 2 p305

The following extracts from various acquaintances of Whitefield reveal how he used the Church of England's liturgy and formularies in his public ministry:

> *'…Whitefield spoke of the Liturgy of the Church of England as "one of the most excellent forms of public prayer in the world."'* Vol 2 p470

> *'He uses certain of the prayers of the Church of England service and then begins to preach'* [at his open-air services at Kennington Common]. Vol 1, p351.

> *'In the evening he…vindicated the doctrines of grace, fenced them with articles and homilies, referred to the martyrs' seal, and exemplified the power of divine grace in their sufferings by quotations from the venerable Foxe.'* Vol 2 p485

Whitefield also drew up a *List of Rules* for his orphan house in Georgia which were to be implemented in the day-to-day operation of the college, these included:

10. *All orphans and students to learn and repeat the Thirty-nine Articles.*
11. *The Homilies to be read publicly, every year, by the students in rotation.*
Vol 2 p492

Renewing the Church of England

Although Whitefield was in agreement with the Church of England formularies he was not blind to the Church's deadness, and therefore sought to renew it from within. The chapter in volume two, *'The Evangelical Party in the Church of England,'* gives a useful summary of his attitude to and policy in the Church of England and it also gives details of other evangelical ministers in the Church with whom he had close fellowship, notably: John Newton, William Grimshaw, Henry Venn, William Romaine and Augustus Toplady. The following quotes from Dallimore give some idea as to Whitefield's policy of seeking to renew the Church:

> *'Since the beginning of his ministry Whitefield had not only looked upon himself as a loyal son of the Church of England but also upon his labours as aimed chiefly at effecting the spiritual betterment of that body.'* Vol 2 p305.

> *'But Whitefield thought of this movement as particularly within the Church of England. He believed that the doctrines he taught were simply those of her Articles and, having convinced himself (whether rightly or wrongly) that his open-air and itinerant proceedings were not contrary to her laws, he sought to induce other members of the clergy to believe the same things and perform the same work. Wherever he had gone he found some of them who were favourable to his message and who welcomed him to their pulpits…This endeavour to raise up an evangelical ministry in the national Church remained one of Whitefield's principal purposes throughout life. Hand in hand with his denunciations of an unconverted ministry there went his constant encouragement of those who were sound in the evangelical faith…these efforts gradually resulting in the formation of a strong evangelical party within the Church of England.'* (Vol 1, p383).

Distress at the state of the Church

Whitefield's love for the Church of England is apparent from his grief over the spiritual condition of the national church and particularly his disappointment with the majority of its clergy who were failing to preach the gospel:

> *'I am and profess myself, a member of the Church of England…I keep close to her Articles and Homilies, which, if my opposers did, we should not have so many dissenters from her. But it is most notorious that, for the iniquity of the priests, the land mourns. We have preached and lived many sincere persons out of our communion…they went from the Church because they could not find food for their souls. They stayed among us till they were starved out.'* Vol 1, p338.

> *'…I must lift up my voice like a trumpet, and shew how sadly our Church ministers are fallen away from the doctrines of the Reformation.'* Vol 1 p549.

Work with Dissenters

Whitefield often found that local parish churches were closed to him, and therefore he sought to preach where he was welcome – often in non-conformist pulpits. It was amongst the non-conformist ministers, particularly in North America, where he enjoyed the greatest support and closest Christian fellowship, since they too preached the *new birth*. For Whitefield the most important ground for Christian fellowship and cooperation in gospel work was evangelical soundness. According to Dallimore:

> *'…the logical conclusions of the doctrine of the new birth had caused him to embrace the friendship of regenerate men among the Dissenters…Thus he had come to a position in which not denominational adherence but evangelical soundness was the criterion and his work had become non-denominational in character.'* Vol 1, p438

Lessons and Questions for today

Whitefield teaches us that if we serve in Anglican churches we should not be ashamed to be committed to the formularies of the Church because they are Scriptural and evangelical. We should not just view ministry in the Church of England in a pragmatic way as many do today (because of the opportunities to minister to larger numbers of people) but because we believe that the Church of England, theoretically, is a good church to minister in. Therefore (like Whitefield) we should be distressed and mourn where we see the Church failing to adhere to and proclaim the doctrine contained in its formularies.

Whitefield's courageous stand should encourage us not to be afraid to speak out against the corruption and deadness in the church, even if it means contending against those clergy or bishops who are failing in their duty to preach the gospel. Whitefield's experience should warn us that if we do speak out for the truth we should expect opposition from those within the Church who are not preaching the gospel. However, if we are faithful to God's Word we can expect to find others who are seeking to be faithful and enjoy their fellowship and service. This was certainly Whitefield's experience with the evangelical party in the Church of England.

True unity

Whitefield also teaches us lessons about the nature of true Christian unity. He was only prepared to engage in gospel work with those who preached it. Seeking unity in gospel work with those who didn't preach it would have been unthinkable to him.[2]

As evangelicals in the Church of England do we seek Christian unity and fellowship with those who are faithful in upholding the Church's formularies, or are we tempted to seek unity around a shared concern such as opposing liberalism or sexual immorality in the church, even if many of those involved do not preach the gospel, or teach doctrine contrary to the Church of England's formularies?

If we attend our local Anglican church are we involved in local church ecumenical groups where some churches do not preach the gospel? Sadly most local ecumenical groups ignore or downplay differences in doctrine and consequently contain liberal or Roman Catholic churches. Do we resist the pressure to join such groups by making it clear that we will not compromise the gospel?

Are we prepared to work with evangelical churches in different denominations for the sake of the gospel even if we disagree on some secondary issues such as baptism or church government? Whitefield would surely have been encouraged today to see churches who may differ on some secondary issues, working together in gospel partnerships, nationwide mission initiatives, bible teaching conferences, theological colleges or Christian youth camps etc. Is our unity always focused on the gospel? For Whitefield it was.

David Meager is a member of the staff team at Church Society

Endnotes:

1) These Cross†Way articles on Whitefield are based on quotes taken from the biography by Arnold Dallimore: *George Whitefield – The life and times of the great evangelist of the 18th Century revival*, Banner of Truth. Volume 1 was published in 1970, volume 2 in 1980.

2) For further information see, *'Whitefield and Catholicity'* on the IX Marks website, where Iain Murray explains how Whitefield worked with other denominations:
http://media.9marks.org/2005/05/20/whitefield-and-catholicity-with-iain-murray